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## Dear Diary: A Celebration of Diaries and their Digital Descendants

The Dear Diary Exhibition, King's College London, 2017

**Rozemarijn van de Wal**

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Diaries present a valuable source for historical research. They provide an insight into the lives of ordinary people, informing us about the everyday as well as the extraordinary in the context of changing times and societies. Diaries give us a personal perspective on public issues, an understanding of how people thought at a certain time and place, information almost unobtainable from other sources. However, diary writing is a genre at risk. Not only do diarists often disregard the value of their writings and make no plans or efforts for their future conservation, but the private nature of diaries often makes people hesitant about saving them for future generations. In addition, the advancement of the digital age is radically changing the genre. Traditionally associated with pen and paper, diaries are increasingly 'written' online or otherwise compiled through the use of digital methods. The internet is quite literally changing our lives as well as the practices of life-writing.

Such issues inspired the organisers of the *Dear Diary* exhibition. Set up by English literature and culture Professor Clare Brant in cooperation with Dr Polly North, Director of the *Great Diary Project*, the exhibition was both a celebration of diaries, showcasing them in all their shapes and sizes, and a conversation about characteristics and practices of life-writing — and also their changes over a long historical period. Walking through the different rooms, visitors were exposed to the diary genre in all its richness, every room addressing different topics such as 'Beginnings,' 'Lifelogging,' 'Diarist Encounters,' 'Intimacy,' 'Secrecy,' 'Digital Sharing,' 'A Day in their Shoes,' 'Diaries of Others' and 'Endings.' In doing so,

the exposition touched upon several issues related to diaries in general and their characteristics as well as the practices and experiences of the diarists, specifically discussing how digital methods have influenced and shaped the diary genre as it moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The exhibition started at 'Beginnings,' a celebration of the history of traditional pen and ink diary writing, charting the advent of life-writing practices from almanacs to modern-day diaries, including both Western and non-Western examples. Using a timeline, this long diary history was visualised through instances of the diary genre from different media, including manuscript, text, film, television, social media and digital. Furthermore, in order to explain why diaries look the way they do, the exhibition showed a copy of the earliest almanac, which dates from 1400 BC and was used to chart the movements of stars, planets and heavenly bodies. Such astronomical information was considered as a means for foretelling the future and almanacs started to include horoscopes as well as religious and/or agricultural calendars. In short, almanacs became a popular form of life-writing and their yearly publication basically provided the model



The Dear Diary Exhibition Timeline.

Photo © Clare Brant

for modern day diaries as annual purchases and influenced their overall look. Interestingly however, it wasn't until 1581 that the word 'diary' was first used in Britain. This was just a little under a hundred years before Britain's most famous diarist Samuel Pepys started writing his daily entries. Nineteenth-century Britain would become a great era for diaries, producing many writings from both ordinary Victorians as well as famous novelists including Oscar Wilde and Katherine Mansfield.

A particularly interesting aspect of 'Beginnings' was its focus on paratext and its importance for diary research. Paratext refers to the information frequently printed on the first pages of a diary, including details about currencies or measurements, holidays, time zones and even information about the movements of the sun, moon and other planets. Besides being a reference to the data-orientated origins of diary writing, it can be considered as a text in its own right, indicating what was considered important and useful information at a certain time and place. Indeed, large diary suppliers such as Boots soon started targeting specific groups ranging from farmers to wine connoisseurs, designing diaries with paratext of specific interest to these specific groups.

But how have diaries changed under the influence of digital media and how does this affect the form and content of the genre? 'Diarist Encounters' illustrated the infinite variety of recurring themes and topics among diarists. Examples on display from the past 150 years included a bird-watching diary, weather diaries, garden diaries and even diaries containing lists of names indicating whether the diarist liked, disliked or even hated that particular person. As the room convincingly showed, diaries clearly fulfil many different functions and come in an endless variety of forms. At the same time, diaries are not without conventions. In nineteenth-century Britain, for instance, diary writing was regularly an informal part of every young girl's education. These writing practices were subject to rules and regulations which girls learned about either through etiquette books or through reading published diaries by well-known novelists. Nowadays, these etiquette books have been replaced by numerous 'wikihow' webpages on diary writing, addressing topics including how to write a diary, how to stick to it, and even how to make a diary on your computer. Other examples include diary apps and online diary writing platforms which just through their format and possibilities influence and structure diary writing.

The practices of diary writing are radically changing under the influence of digital methods. As the exhibition showed, there is a development from 'I am what I write' to 'you are your data.' This argument was perhaps best visualised by 'Rob's Browser History': a print-out of the browser history of a postdoctoral researcher in the KCL Ego Media research group,



Diaries in their various (analogue and digital) shapes and sizes.

Photo © Polly North

Rob Gallagher, listing all the internet webpages Rob visited throughout just one day. This was a striking illustration of the idea that you are in fact your data. Indeed, the digital age has brought with it the phenomenon of ‘quantifying’ rather than merely writing the self. Traditionally, diaries were often used for keeping track of things, ranging from bird watching diaries to health or dietary diaries. Online diaries fulfil the same function but by introducing digital methods and apps, the body is quite literally quantified in a way that was not possible before. The exhibition exemplified this by films analysing some aspects of running and sleeping apps, and the digital methods which enable us to keep track of everything, quantifying and sometimes even streaming and sharing bodily experience. By these means, private experience is made public.

This immediately brings us to the issue of privacy. Diaries are often considered highly personal sources, writings that are not meant to be read by other people. Nevertheless, diarists are always writing for some sort of audience. This can be a fictitious audience indicated by ‘dear Jane’ on the top of the page or even just a future self. Indeed, the simple fact that many diarists choose to write their diary in code (which is another practice subject to conventions as indicated by the wikihow page on writing a coded diary) presupposes the possible existence of an audience. What is striking about diaries online is how the boundaries surrounding privacy are increasingly becoming blurred. As was illustrated by the exhibition

under ‘Lifelogging,’ digital methods make it possible to directly stream video diaries onto social media or other internet webpages to a largely anonymous audience of followers. This brings with it new and interesting dynamics between public and private. Sharing filmed diary entries, for instance on YouTube, makes for a very present and public audience that at the same time remains completely anonymous except through comment threads. A similar dynamic is presented by forums such as reddit that offer opportunities for keeping a diary online that is accessible to everyone on the internet. The forum encourages intimacy through openness, without providing any personal details which can make the writer identifiable. These relationships raise interesting questions about intimacy and its forms.

Another important topic of the exhibition was the question of *why* people write diaries? What are the benefits of doing so? From its advent, diary writing has been considered an important way for learning about the self, illustrated most fittingly by the idea of ‘I am what I write.’ Learning about an earlier self can, however, be embarrassing as the exhibition illustrated by videos in the ‘Intimacy’ section, showing several young women (rather uncomfortably) reading aloud entries from their childhood diaries. But diaries can also function as a way to empower the self. The most striking example of this was the project ‘A Day in their Shoes.’ The organisers of the *Dear Diary* exposition had contacted The Stabilisation and Recovery Network (TSRN) and invited them to curate a section on refugee diaries. TSRN then asked some of their contacts among human rights workers to make a filmed account of their everyday experiences, without providing any instructions or directions about what to film. The resulting films include a representation of life in a refugee camp that is deeply human and personal. It is empowering in the sense that it brings names, faces and voices to individual refugees. They are not just numbers, they are people and through these filmed diaries TSRN found a way to counter compassion fatigue.

But there are more ways in which digital methods have influenced the practices of diary writing. Take for example the case of mummy diaries, exhibited in the ‘digital sharing hallway.’ These are vlogs made by mothers about their everyday lives. These women just talk about their day to day activities, thoughts, experiences, sharing them with an ever-growing number of anonymous followers. They often say how creating these vlogs are therapeutic for them and how sharing their experiences with other mothers can be empowering. Some of these vlogs have become so popular that these mothers have been able to commodify their diaries. Large companies have contacted them to try out, review or promote their products, making it possible for the mothers to monetize their experience.

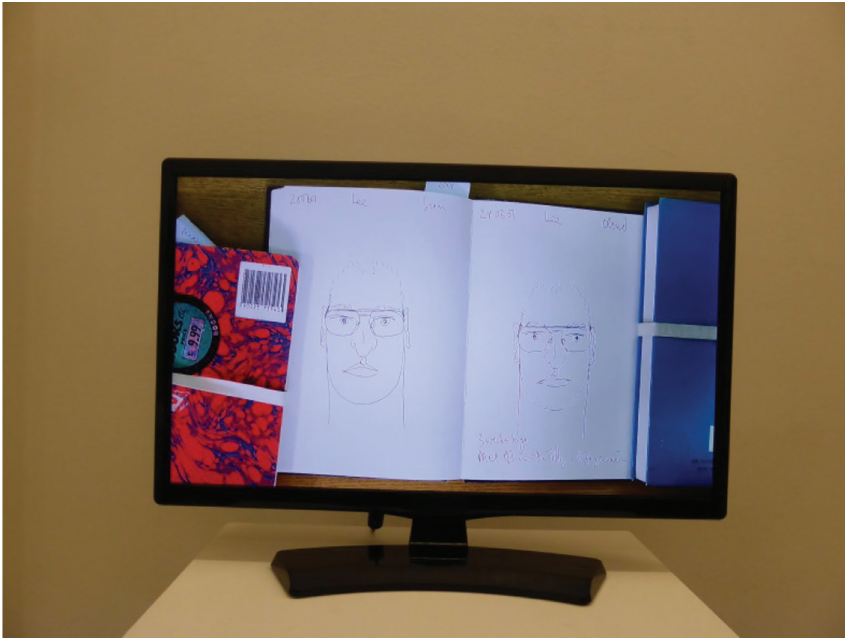
While making it possible to earn a livelihood through diaries, this brings with it ethical questions about truth-telling, promoting items for money — and monetizing the self.

What is however perhaps the most striking feature of digital diaries is the promise of prosthetic memory. It is now possible to keep track of absolutely everything, ranging from your browser history, sleep and exercise patterns, to data about how often you use your phone, and what you do for every minute of the day. Life is being quantified as never before, going as far as being able to list and track moods through the use of images and emoticons. Yet storing this big data digitally simultaneously comprises dangers of loss, as the exhibition exemplified under ‘Endings.’ Digital methods are rapidly evolving: as new software is developed, other software becomes outdated and obsolete. More than ever before, digital methods have made the diary genre precarious. Precarity of paper is common knowledge but the precarity of digital data less so. Phones or computers break down, software becomes inaccessible and data gets lost as illustrated by the example of ‘Open Diary.’ Founded in 1998, Open Diary was a platform on the internet where for sixteen years users would write their daily entries. On one weekend in 2014, the site just disappeared; all of its content simply vanished. Thousands of people were left bereft of their writings. One wrote an elegiac tribute to what she called ‘the cemetery of lost prose’ as a tribute to Open Diary.

The exhibition finished with perhaps the most important aspect of diary writing in general, whether online, through the use of apps or with good old paper and ink, namely ‘living diarists in focus’ — people who actually write diaries or who quantify and perform their selves. Showing four different people being interviewed about their diary writing habits, it once more becomes clear just how diverse the genre is. Some people treat their diary as a way of keeping track, writing about events of the day in a rather factual manner. One of the diarists used her diary to keep track of baseball league and baseball games. Other people are very reflexive, considering diary writing as a way of expressing the self on paper, sharing some of their innermost thoughts. For them, the idea of being completely honest is very important. They are writing for their future selves: why would you want to re-read something if it was untrue? Another of the diarists ‘wrote’ his diary by drawing a picture of himself every night and adding a few lines on the events of his day. These examples showcased once more just how diverse the genre is and just how many ways there are for expressing, writing and quantifying the self.

As a sort of inspiration, the exhibition’s final part was made up by a bare wall slowly getting filled with cards. Visitors were asked to take a card and write something down, either about their day, about the exposition or





Pages from Andrew Law's daily drawings diary.

Photo © Clare Brant

anything else they wanted to share. The result was a sort of cross-section of experiences and thoughts provoked by the exhibition. In conclusion, this brings me to my personal favourite example of diary writing shown in the exhibition: the diary of Peter Fletcher, a man who for many years kept track of his sneezes. Every time he sneezed he wrote down where he was while sneezing, provided a characterization of the sneeze (for instance, whether it was moderate or strong) and what he was doing at the time he sneezed. The result is a truly remarkable sectional representation of his life, cataloguing the everyday in a deceptively random manner and all made available online, adding once more to the seemingly endless possibilities of research for future life-writing historians.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rozemarijn van de Wal is a PhD student at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. She obtained her MA in cultural history in 2014 with a thesis on



Beatrix Potter, and is now undertaking doctoral research as a member of Project SPICE: Scientific Personae in Cultural Encounters. An international research project, SPICE examines the concept of 'scientific persona' understood as 'scientific identity.' Within the project, van de Wal is researching a biography of the British medieval historian, Eileen Power (1889–1940). Her research interests include 'biography,' 'gender studies,' 'life-writing' and Victorian/Edwardian Britain.